Wood and Adze:

The Revival of Bowl Hewing in Indiana

Photographed and curated by Jon Kay

Bill Day, Warren County

Bowl hewing is an ancient craft where slabs of wood are chopped with an adze, a hatchet-like tool with the blade turned sideways. While the craft nearly vanished in the early 20th Century in the United States, it enjoyed a revival in Indiana when Bill Day started hewing artfully rustic bowls out of cherry, poplar, and sassafras. Day saw an antique hand-hewed bowl that his wife had purchased and wondered how it was made. Through trial and error, he taught himself the forgotten craft, which became his retirement career. He opened his "Chop Shop" in West Lebanon, Indiana where he made bowls, visited with customers, and sold his wares. Day became a long-time demonstrator at the Indiana State Fair's Pioneer Village, where he introduced the craft to millions of fairgoers, but more importantly inspired a new generation of bowl makers in Indiana.

This exhibit follows Day's students and their work through the years, including Keith Ruble, who also inspired others to begin woodworking.

All photos above depict Bill Day in his studio.

A New Generation of Bowl Makers

Keith Ruble, Vigo County

In 1980, Day met his most ardent student, Keith Ruble, who volunteered to build a log cabin for the Pioneer Village at the State Fair. The superintendent of Vigo County Parks, Ruble had hand built several log structures and enjoyed working with hand tools. Already experienced at hewing and notching logs, he honed his woodworking skills by learning to chop bowls. Ruble took Day's revived craft to the next level, producing pieces that were thinly hewed and artfully finished in a variety of shapes. Each year the two fair volunteers would demonstrate alongside each other until Day's passing in 1999 at age 84, after which Ruble became the fair's bowl hewer. Since then, Ruble has revitalized the craft, having taught dozens of people to chop bowls, including his sons Andy and Luke and his daughter-in-law Kasey Ruble, who participated in Traditional Arts Indiana's Apprenticeship program in 2020. Keith chops thin bowls from poplar, butternut, cherry, and other native hardwoods in a variety of shapes and sizes.

Above, Keith Ruble displays some of his work.

Hew (hyōo): to make or shape by chopping.

Blaine Berry, Vigo County

Raised by his grandparents in Clinton, Indiana, Blaine Berry began cutting firewood with a handsaw when he was seven-years-old. He grew up to be an arborist, and began turning bowls on a lathe for his customers from the trees he cut for them. He explains, "I've always had a lathe and I used to make round bowls--That's all I could make was round bowls!" Then in the fall of 1984, when he was at the Bridgeton Covered Bridge Festival, he met Keith Ruble, who was chopping out bowls in all different shapes. The two became good friends, and Keith showed Blaine the basics of bowl making. Through the years, Blaine also stopped to visit with Bill Day at his "quaint little shop" and listen to his stories. After Bill passed away Blaine began demonstrating bowl and chair making in Day's old spot at the State Fair. "When I get through with that bowl-- I feel good." he explains, "I feel good again when somebody buys it. And, I feel good the next year when they come back. So, I get paid over and over and over again, and each time it makes me feel good."

Dale Findley, Vigo County

Thinking that her husband needed a retirement hobby, Dale Findley's wife gave her husband bowl making lessons as a Christmas gift in 2018. Under Keith Ruble's direction, Dale began chopping bowls. In the first year, he produced twenty-four bowls. Then the Covid-19 Pandemic forced the fledgling bowl maker and his wife into social isolation. He recalls," We were really concerned about COVID, and we didn't go any place, so [bowl making] was a real godsend." Between March 2020 and July 2021, Dale made fifty-four more bowls. He explains, "it kept me going. It's an amazing hobby. It's something you can really feel good about, you know. It's productive." Dale observed that some retirees "go downhill because their work is gone." But bowl making gives him purpose. "My kids and grandkids seem to like them, you know. So, grandpa is not dead yet."

Above, upper left, Berry displays his handiwork. Upper right, Findley in his studio.

Glen Summers, Parke County

While visiting the Indiana State Fair in 1982, Glen Summers spent the afternoon talking with the elder bowl maker watching him work. After that chance meeting, Summers found a bowl adze at a flea market and taught himself to hew bowls. After years making bowls in rural Parke County, Indiana, he reconnected with Day, and occasionally visited Day's Chop Shop to talk about bowl making. Using a froe, maul, adze, and spokeshave, Summers made flat platter-style bowls, which he would sell at the Covered Bridge Festival. Summers made hundreds of bowls through the years, but stopped chopping after developing tendonitis. In 2015 he moved to eastern New York to work with the U.S. Forest Service.

Bottom left, Summers, and Combs, bottom right, with their work. Bottom center, tools of the trade.

Michael Combs, Monroe County

Michael Combs' life was forever changed when he saw Bill Day chopping bowls at the Indiana State Fair in 1997. "I was really drawn to it," he recalls, "I just kept watching, and it came to me-- I need to try that." Michael concedes that his first bowl was "not much to look at" but it encouraged him to make another, and then another. After chopping a few more bowls, he took one to West Lebanon to show it to Bill Day and to ask a few questions. Michael continued to improve. He tried different adzes, but couldn't find one that worked for him. So, he made one from a car's leaf spring, a metal socket, and a whittled down shovel handle. The angle of his short-blade adze was perfect for chopping the dappled surface of the bowl. Today, he uses two adzes, his homemade adze for finishing, and a larger adze for "bulking out" or removing a large amount of material quickly, "It's a simple craft," he explains "all it takes is one tool, one piece of wood, and one very good arm." Michael averaged making a bowl a day for nearly two decades. Through those years, he perfected his style and developed a chopping technique that gives his artfully sculpted bowls a distinctive texture that resembles hammered copper.

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Landfill
LANDFILL

Keith Ruble
Oval Platter Bowl, 2021
Wild Cherry
Vigo County, Indiana
Keith Ruble
Large Platter Bowl, 2021
Black Walnut
Vigo County, Indiana
Keith Ruble
Square Bowl, ND
Black Walnut
Keith Ruble
Square Bowl, 2019
Sassafras

Keith Ruble
Bowl with Natural Sides, 2019
Tulip Poplar
Vigo County, Indiana
Keith Ruble
Square Bowl, 2019
Sugar Maple
Vigo County, Indiana
Keith Ruble
Maple Leaf Bowl, ND
Sugar Maple
Vigo County, Indiana

Keith Ruble
Square Bowl, ND
Black Walnut
Vigo County, Indiana
Keith Ruble
Fish Bowl, 2021
Wild Cherry
Vigo County, Indiana
Keith Ruble
Square Bowl, 2019
Sassafras
Vigo County, Indiana

Keith Ruble
Rectangular Bowl, ND
Kentucky Coffee Tree
Vigo County, Indiana
Blaine Berry
Tray, 2021
Wild Cherry
Vigo County, Indiana

Glen Summers
Platter Bowl, 2014
Walnut
Parke County, Indiana
Dale Findley
Bowl #69, 2021
Sassafras
Vigo County, Indiana
Platter Bowl, 2014
Sassafras
Parke County, Indiana
Keith Ruble
Rectangular Bowl, ND
Kentucky Coffee Tree
Vigo County, Indiana
Blaine Berry
Tray, 2021
Wild Cherry
Vigo County, Indiana

Glen Summers
Platter Bowl, 2014
Walnut
Parke County, Indiana
Dale Findley
Bowl #69, 2021
Sassafras
Vigo County, Indiana
Glen Summers
Platter Bowl, 2014
Sassafras
Parke County, Indiana

SAMSUNG
Keith Ruble
Round Bowl, 2021
Wild Cherry
Vigo County, Indiana